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ABSTRACT

Transcribing and footnoting some 186 family letters and documents which revolve around social life at Antioch College (Ohio) in the 1870s and everyday life during the same period allowed a professor to examine a metaphor for personal relationships used at the time: colonialism. His great grandmother, a young widow with three minor children, moved from New York State to Yellow Springs, Ohio, attracted by Antioch's Unitarian associations. Subsequently, all three of her children attended the college. One son corresponds with a friend (Leslie) who moved to the frontier town of Russell, Kansas. They write about marriage prospects, using the colonial metaphor in this context. Colonies as dating or engaged couples are mentioned in Leslie's August 1878 letter: "...outside an endless string of couples, going around and around with the slow measured tread of the colony. I have an idea that there will never be such colonizing at Antioch again as there was last year...." Whereas the word "colony" signifies the pacified state of an established relationship, the word "colonizing" takes on some of the connotations that "womanizing" has. Leslie writes of the forwardness of Kansas women and of the licentiousness of French women, when he later visits Paris. As with America's colonies and client states, a patriarchal system was the norm. Presumably the women of Antioch in the 1870s knew the metaphor of "colonial matters" and acquiesced in their defined roles. (Includes five notes.) (NKA)

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March, 1997

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"Colonial Matters": Dating at Antioch College in the 1870's.

Three years ago Antioch made national news when the media discovered the university had two years earlier enacted a nine page "sexual offense policy," formalizing what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior in amorous relationships. It surfaced at a time when wide scale attacks were being launched on "political correctness," and the document seemed a perfect target for ridicule. The key line in the document was this:

> Obtaining consent is an on-going process in any sexual interaction. Verbal consent should be obtained with each new level of physical and/or sexual contact/conduct in any given interaction, regardless of who initiates it. [1]

It was no doubt the legalistic language and the fine-print spelling out of every possible condition that drew attention.

The metaphor describing personal relationships was the <u>business contract</u>. 120 years ago the metaphor used by some students at Antioch was <u>Colonialism.</u>

For the past year I have been transcribing and footnoting some 186 family letters and documents, most of which were written by my great grandmother, Harriet Swift Chamberlain. In 1867, a widow with three minor children, she took her family from New York state to Yellow Springs, Ohio, attracted by Antioch College's Unitarian associations. Subsequently, all three of her children attended the college. While most family letters predate 1867, among the letters I found were 30 or 35 letters written to my great uncle, Morton Chamberlain, by his college friend Leslie Carter. Most of the letters were written in a two year period--1878 and 1879.

As I read them for the first time, an interesting personality emerged. Leslie was only 17 when he wrote the first of them. I couldn't help but compare him to the freshmen college students I teach, and I was particularly fascinated by

[1] Jeff Giles, "There's a Time for Talk, and a Time for Action," *Newsweek*, 7 March, 1994: 54.

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the college slang, and nicknames, in his letters--and especially the pervasive metaphor he used when referring to dating and male-female relationships: "colonial matters, " and variants--"colonizing," "colony," and " colonists." Looking for the implications of such a metaphor in the era of Manifest Destiny and late 19th Century imperialism seemed to me irresistable.

Morton Chamberlain had graduated from Antioch in 1878 and had taken a newspaper job in Albany, New York. Leslie Carter, his friend since Antioch Prep School, was a still freshman in 1878. Because his father, Artemas Carter--a prominent businessman in Chicago and a trustee of the College, had died the year before, funds were short. An opportunity for full time employment arose when Leslie's older brother, Horace, proposed Leslie join him in operating a lumberyard in Russell, Kansas. In August, 1878, Leslie arrived in Kansas, and letters to Ohio and New York continued through the following August, when Leslie returned to Antioch to resume his education. By the next spring--1880--he had left school again to work in another lumberyard in St. Joseph, Missouri, and a few months later, in Seneca, Kansas. Eventually he moved to Denver; Morton moved to Denver shortly thereafter so few letters exist from Leslie to Mort after the 1880's.

A majority of the letters Leslie wrote concern life in what was then a frontier town--founded only seven years before. By 1878 Russell was a boomtown with three lumberyards and two newspapers--full of "grangers" and English and German immigrants. Gunfights still erupted in the nearby town of Ellis. Half of the material in the letters, though, is nostalgiac reminiscence about College days, news from his sisters about people they knew in Yellow Springs, and gossip about their mutual friends.

Leslie at 17 thought frequently about girls, but it is clear that he was inexperienced. His social awkwardness both in Yellow Springs and in Russell is evident in the following letter where he describes the attempt of his brother's wife to fix him up with a young woman she knew in Russell:

> My knees shook when they told me of the plan & I shall be almost ashamed to look Jeanie, H's wife, in the face tomorrow. I sent the excuse of "letters which must be written tonight." I am getting even more bashful here & shall be perfectly miserable when I go

> back to Y.S. & Antioch where a boy has to be engaged almost before he is recognized at all by the fair ones (November 18, 1878).

Leslie's discussions of women and of marriage are highly idealized. The following excerpt from an August 26, 1878 letter to Mort shows this:

> I often have your dreams of a happy married life. A nice, cozy, pretty room with a blazing fire--a long table set with silverware & a smoking hot supper--a pretty wife sitting opposite & between us two or three images of her--& "over all the light of love" --just such a picture as the "Hanging of the Crane"[1] brings up before one- is my highest idea of happiness. I long for the day when this dream may be realized. . . . Whatever I do I shall never marry until I have plenty of money with which to support a wife. It is too bad to marry & oblige your wife to live in a miserable small house--to oblige her to economize to the last cent. . . to think of that twenty-five dollars which is due the grocer. . . .

It is in this context the Leslie first uses the colonial metaphor:

> I should really pity, & be sorry for Will if he should tie himself down to Miss Cook. She would I think be a hindrance to his success in life; she seemed to me, & I saw a great deal of her at one time, to be simply nobody--never had an opinion & never had anything to say . . . Before I came away, I thought that Will was pretty deep in a colony but did not think that he was in earnest any more than colonists usually are,---Stephie for instance. People at Winnetka . . . think that Antioch is a regular hot house for marriages & they even cautioned <u>me</u> against marrying a Kansas girl.

The Will mentioned in the letter is my grandfather; Miss Cook (my grandmother), became his wife in 1885. He had proposed to her a month before Leslie had

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[1] a poem by Longfellow about domestic bliss, first published in 1874, and inspired by a visit to the home of Thomas Bailey Aldrich shortly after the latter's marriage.

written this letter to Mort. "Stephie" was Stephen Weston, a classmate at Antioch, later to become a professor there and acting President of the college in 1903.

Marriage as an entanglement that one might live to regret is even more forcefully emphasized in Leslie's disapproval of some of his classmates' behavior that became the scandal of the College in the spring of 1878--two male friends had to marry their pregnant girlfriends. He writes:

> Who ever dreamt such a thing, that Rome w'ld commit such a crime--or Mary Alderson, one of the best girls & students at Antioch. . . .I was not so surprised at the [Studybaker] affair--because I never thought much of Miss Pottinger--but I thought that Study had more respect for himself in such a way. How awful it must be for him to go into Y.S. after such a thing. . . I thought that Rome was a promising youth the last time I saw him & we all had such a good time--when he came to get [Mary] Alderson's furniture, playing cards, etc. in the South Dorm. We had a fest, Applegate, Winslow, Stephie, Rome, & I & then went to the Neff House--sang &. I had a wrestle with Rome in the dark--opposite Allen's room--which ended in a draw, both being tired out & nobody thrown. Antioch will not recover from this blow for years & coeducation everywhere will suffer from it. But enough on that topic (October 10, 1878).

It is also possible that Leslie saw these "colonies" as enclaves, and that he felt excluded as others paired off. He may have felt resentment that the male camradery he enjoyed was threatened as the old gang was broken up by marriages and engagements. Leslie's closest relationships, at least until his marriage when he was 37, were with his male friends. The comradery is evident in his descriptions of wrestling with his friends as they walk back to their dormatories, and in his description of his desire for a close male friend when he writes of his loneliness in St. Joseph in his second trip west. Indeed the whole course of these letters written in 1878-79 to Mort --"dear boy," suggests more emotional connection that Leslie might have been willing to admit. Leslie was in many ways still a boy in 1878, but Mort, born in 1855, was five years his senior. Women

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were sometimes seen as pals, but in marriage they were to have loftier feelings than men--as in Leslie's statements about Mary Alderson--her disgrace was greater than her lover Jerome MacNeil's (Rome), because he was a male like Leslie--and of recognizably baser stuff. His dream women were also of a separate order.

A colony as an enclave--with the emphasis on its separation from the influence of the world at large is seen in other letters where the metaphor turns up. A real colony of this kind is mentioned in a description of the town of Victoria, founded by English immigrants:

> In Victoria we drove up to the Inn in fine Tally Ho coach style & were welcomed by a tremendously fat English woman who ushered us into a large room with an open fireplace, counter, bottles, lofty ceiling--smoky rafters, etc. just exactly like such a room or tavern as you read about in Dickens--like the Mapole tavern[1] . . . . It was founded by a rich Englishman, she said, who came there direct from the auld country--bought stock, land, etc. & set them all up in farms--hardly was the colony put on a solid footing however--when Death--the dread destroyer--overtook him, & since his death--no one had been found--she said--capable of managing the colony affairs--lending money to the poor, etc. On this account many of them returned to England while many others scattered themselves over the state & country & so but few of the original Johnnies are left. She told many a thrilling tale of the early life of the colony--adventures with Indians, etc. & on the whole we quite enjoyed our feast & stop there--given free as it was by the kind old English heart (November 18, 1878).

Colonies as dating or engaged couples are mentioned again in the following:

> After dinner you went to Alumni meeting & I gassed to Bessie under the trees. . . . In the evening the reception at the Hairy's -- the dense & suffocating crowd within . . . the Hairy[2] himself in

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[1] The Maypole Inn in *Barnaby Rudge*, chapter 1.

[2] a student nickname for Antioch's then President, Samuel Derby.

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> hot water all the evening, standing in the corner by the door, obliged to talk & outside an endless string of couples, going around & around with the slow measured tread of the colony. I have an idea that there never will be such colonizing at Antioch again as there was last year. . . . (August 13, 1878).

In Kansas Leslie began to see himself in a world more real than college--a view that eventually caused him to think college a waste of time; he never completed more than a year of classwork. But in April of 1879, looking forward to returning to school the next fall with his businessman's view of life in earnest, he writes: "I will feel like a patriarch--all my old friends gone & new ones in their places" (April 19, 1879).

That fall, describing preparations for the annual Halloween Masquerade Leslie reveals something about the restraints placed on male-female social gatherings at the time. President Derby ("The Hairy"), forbade round dancing at the Masquerade. This restrictiveness explains some of what he says in this same letter about Stephen Weston's activities.

> You may have had news of the most foolish thing which ever happened--the engagement of Ollie & Stevie--but if you have not--leave it now. Did you ever? Ollie is a perfect goose & she will no more marry Stephen, although she may believe his professions of love & trust & confide in him--than she will fly. The minute I read the news I pitied her--she is deluded--Steph means it no more than any thing--I can say that from my knowledge of his character. How many times has he been engaged before? & How many hearts has he trifled with seemingly in good faith before? My private opinion is that he wants to have a good time, wants to have a girl to hug & kiss & love & talk love to until he graduates. That may be the private understanding between them to hoodwink the faculty to enable themselves to go together--but if Ollie expects anything else of Stephen--or if she believes him to be sincere she is mistaken. But enough of that. . . .

Whereas the word "colony" signifies the pacifed state of an established relationship, the word "colonizing" takes on some of the connotations that

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"womanizing" has. The relationship as a means to an end--to the benefit of the male and at the expense of the woman--is elaborated in Leslie's discussions of his new found freedom in Russell and the ambivalence he felt about women he met there:

> I expect to have glorious times when we are moved into our new rooms. Horace contracted for & built a house for a man here & the man skipped. So we are going to get our money out of it by living in it. It is only a very small house--having only three rooms in it & will be just the place to have fun in. It has a kitchen, etc. We can come in at any hour of the night & no one will be the wiser. I am glad of this for in Y.S. I was tied in so that I became sick of it. --& colonizationally speaking the house will have many facilities for making an exit or an entrance at any time.

But he continues with a hint of misgivings about the situation:

> I will confess to you, boy, that I am getting into the toils of a certain female here. Her name is Arbuckle--no relation however to the Ariosa Coffee man. She is just the least bit strong minded & has opinions of her own--but I like that--I like to fight with her about this & that. Her father is a great temperance lecturer & has been on the platform with Murphy since the latter first held his meetings. I can rely on you not to give me away to anyone I know, or else I will not tell you this (April 19, 1879).

Yet Leslie soon grows disillusioned by Miss Arbuckle. In his very next letter to Mort he writes:

> Miss Arbuckle turned out to be a fraud--too strong minded & headstrong. I went with Miss Pierce to several of the parties & had a rambunctious time. On the night of one of the parties it commenced to rain at about 12 o'clock & at three two of us went to the livery stable & hired a buggy to take our girls home in. We lost the road of course & did not roll in until six the next morning. . . .
>
> Such a spree only comes once in a lifetime & I am glad that it

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comes no oftener--for my clothes & necktie were about ruined. Miss Pierce was a great friend of H's wife & we all thought her perfect--a refined & cultured young lady from Mass. --but she turns out to be a rather different article. She almost asks you to encircle--holds your hand when you say goodnight & don't object very much when you press her to your bosom. I know it is not right or proper to go with such girls & yet the temptation is overpowering--for laying aside this bad trait in her character, she is as well educated & refined a girl as I ever knew.

Moreover she lets everybody kiss her--& of course this promotes a great jealousy among the youths here--for each one while in her company is made to believe that he is the chosen one of all the throng & is made to laugh at all the others & think himself at the top of the heap. You see that I tell you every thing, old boy, for one's colonial matters are the most sacred & secret of all things & the last to be disclosed. The kids out here all think that this is all the fun there is in going with girls--to be able to hug & kiss them. Girls are foolish to allow it, I think, for if they ever want to be married this habit is seen to prevent it, for if a kid can kiss & hug a girl whenever he feels like it--in the end it grows rather stale--& he deserts & takes fresh territory--& so it goes; each one is in grace for a short time & then he passes on & no one lingers to pop the question, or to tie the knot for life & in earnest. When a kid finds a girl who is "no such" he respects her & thinks that her love is worth <u>earning</u> & <u>striving after</u> & is far more apt to behave himself & to love in earnest.

This is what I sh'd think all girls w'ld know & those who do not know it now will have time to think over it & see the errors of their ways when as old maids of forty they think of the good times of girlhood & see the present happiness of those who as girls <u>refrained</u>.

Nobody w'ld marry such a girl for he w'ld be afraid that the minister or some regular caller w'ld be hugging & kissing his wife all the time & that she w'ld in the end disgrace him (May 18, 1879).

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The metaphor of colonization, with its implications of staking a claim, defending territory --is at its most explicit here in Leslie's reference to "taking fresh territory," if the girl proves not to meet his standards.

If Leslie felt Kansas girls were too forward--too sexually aggressive for his idealized view of women, he saw the possibility of a different kind of woman--less threatening-- in the English girls he had known at Antioch--the sisters of Oliver Herford. Oliver was to become a prominent humorist, illustrator, and playwright by the beginning of the 20th century. He had attended Antioch briefly, and his sisters were students there as well. The whole family had been born in England. The youngest sister, Laura, is described in a letter he wrote to Mort in October, 1880:

> I enjoyed your description of Laura very much & have decided to take the next one in the line if there be a next & if she is anything like Laura. From what I have seen of the silly city girls I think I should prefer a nice intellectual English girl for a wife. . . (June 19, 1880).

He suggests another, less noble motive for marriage:

> Have you found that family of sweet girls yet--which we are going to marry into? Laura Brook [Herford] is developing into quite a young lady. I see her name in the Chicago papers in the "Social News" column as playing a prominent part in the Unitarian Church sociables, plays, etc. etc. . . .
>
> I think more of money now than anything & want a rich wife --for after all one can do very little & be very little in this age without money. An insignificant man without money--becomes a man of great authority & influence when backed by 100,000.00 flat, even dollars and vice versa, a well educated man & a man in every way suited for something high--if he has no money is a nobody. . . . (March 1, 1880).

Carter's descendents have told me that Leslie did marry a young Englishwoman some time in 1886 when he was 26, but that the woman had died

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shortly after their marriage. The Carter family had no knowledge of her identity, and he apparently never discussed it with his daughter who died only a few years ago. His trip to England that year was apparently to look up the young woman's relatives. But several months on the continent induced culture shock. In a letter to Mort from Paris, Leslie, the innocent Jamesian American abroad writes:

> The French are the most licentious people on earth, I think. The men are all whoremasters, the women prostitutes--the theatres are full of them, the boulevards, cafes, & in fact you can knock them down with a club anywhere. The first night I went to the Theatre with Mrs. B. I stepped out to take a stretch between the acts & a beautiful creature came up to me & wanted to take me home with her. Last night also, as I came home about midnight a girl came up behind me & took my arm & walked along with me--but I threw her off & damned her so that she understood & went up a side street. I should be almost afraid to have you come to Paris as you might be led astray by some beautiful young girl. I never saw so many beautiful women as there are here--all of them prostitutes I presume (November 29, 1886).

Carter's idealization of women he regarded as marriageable is predicated on their absence of sexual aggressiveness; The French he describes as dissolute in his letter to Mort from Paris show what can happen if men don't protect women and prescribe the extent to which they can act within the social sphere. The contrast of then and now is evident in *Newsweek*'s article on Antioch's sexual offense policy. Jeff Giles points out that 70% of the student population at Antioch in 1992 was female, and that Yellow Springs, always radical for its times, has had a strong Lesbian community. He writes, "No one denies that the female students run Antioch--both politically and sexually (55). An article by Eric Fassin in the *New York Times* claims that what has really changed is the balance of power in erotic relationships. Males had traditionally been initiators of relationships. Females were defined as "gatekeepers." Antioch's Prior Consent rules "shift the burden of clarification to the man."[1]

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[1] "Playing by the Antioch Rules," The New York Times (26 Dec. 1993): E11.

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In the 19th century, slavery, and later racism, had been defended with the rhetoric of Christianity. So too had imperialism been described in terms of missionary idealism. In the words of Theodore Roosevelt (who was of Leslie's generation) brown-skinned peoples of the world were not yet ready for self-rule. Their interests had to be looked after.

> The Philippines offer a . . . problem. Many of their people are utterly unfit for self-government. . . . Others may in time become fit but at present can only take part in self-government under wise supervision, at once firm and beneficent.[1]

In the same essay ("The Strenuous Life" --1899), Roosevelt links gender role definitions and an agressively self-interested foreign policy:

> In the last analysis a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean vigorous, healthy lives . . . . The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare and endure and to labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him. The woman must be the housewife, the helpmeet of the homemaker, the wise and fearless mother of many healthy children. . . . When men fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble of the brink of doom.

As with America's colonies and client states, a patriarchal system was the norm. Presumably the women of Antioch in the 1870's and 1880's knew the metaphor of "colonial matters"[2] and acquiesed in their defined roles. Despite its

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[1] Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life" 1899.

[2] Although there was no record among Antioch's archives of the use of the term "colonial," it is found in the letter of another of Mort's correspondents, Oliver Herford, who writes to him from Chicago about their friend Leslie:

> I intended at first to get to some work as soon as possible but my father wanted me to attend the school of art here, which I have since been doing. . . . But I wish I could <u>hear</u> something of you & Les instead of writing so much about myself. . . . But there seems very little to tell about though it wd be different if I were at Antioch & could give you the latest colonial news, etc. "Stevie's" latest venture in that line for instance. . . . (Spring, 1880).

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being in the forefront of higher education for women, its women graduates usually married, and those who had careers were in traditional occupations such as the teaching of drawing or of writing. In a 1909 memoir, a copy of which was sent to me by Carter's granddaughter, he speaks of his marriage and his devotion to his wife, Anna, who bore him five children--three daughters and two sons (both of whom died in infancy). In preparation for his marriage in 1898, it was Leslie who took the responsibility for buying all the furniture and decorating the house. Anna, twelve years his junior, took cooking lessons for a year.

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